

Inmates settle prison lawsuit

By Samira Jafari
The Associated Press

A federal judge has approved a settlement of a lawsuit to revamp medical care and living conditions at Tutwiler prison for women in Wetumpka, which the court once called a "ticking time bomb."

U.S. District Court Judge Myron Thompson ruled that the settlement between attorneys for inmates and the Department of Corrections properly avoids a trial and calls for essential improvements, including a safer, less crowded living space.

Thompson, in an order signed Monday, said the settlement will not make the women's prison facilities "comfortable or pleasant places, but it will afford class members the basic necessities mandated by the United States Constitution."

He approved the pact after hearing from 81 inmates and after he visited the women's prison twice in the past two years. Most of the inmates' concerns focused on the "unbearable heat within the prison," a lack of attention for their medical needs and "an substantial risk of serious physical violence," Thompson stated.

The judge said many of the inmates have told him they are skeptical the prison system will carry out the improvements. But he said he was "very encouraged" that the prison already has

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become less crowded and better ventilated.

The settlement calls for better access to a doctor and mental health expert for inmates, and monitoring by attorneys and advocates from the Southern Center for Human Rights for four years.

The Southern Center, an Atlanta-based nonprofit law firm, filed the lawsuit in 2002 when Tutwiler had more than 1,000 women in a space built for about 360. Thompson visited the Wetumpka lockup, called it a "ticking time bomb" and ruled it un-

constitutional in December 2002.

The agreement requires DOC to lower the number of prisoners to 700 by November, a figure Tutwiler has been approaching. If the number rises, the state would have to add officers.

DOC spokesman Brian Corbett said the department is confident it will be able to abide by the terms of the agreement.

"I think the mere fact that this is a settlement agreement that we've agreed to and can be held in contempt of is assurance that we will abide by (it)," he said.

Gretchen Rohr, one of the attorneys representing the prison-

ers, said despite the improvements promised in the settlement, there is still plenty of room for improvement on part of the DOC.

"Generally this settlement agreement is affording the women basic constitutional rights," she said. "The settlement agreement does not make Tutwiler an amazing place to be."

Rohr and Corbett both pair overcrowding as a key element to be addressed.

"The root of the problem Tutwiler and most of these suits stems from trying to hold 26,000 inmates in a space holds 12,500," Corbett said.